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THE CORRECTION OF PAPERS¹

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If the good will of my readers may be caught in the ancient fashion, let me say at once that the following remarks are based upon eleven years' experience in the correction of papers, during which I have not consciously neglected the obligations arising from the nature of the work. In the course of a decade one is likely to scrutinize such obligations, and to search for the principles that underlie them.

The principles lie bare when we discover the real significance of our topic. What, then, does "the correction of papers" actually mean? Briefly, it means the correction, or straightening, or normalizing of one personality by another through the instrumentality of truth expressed in language. At least two personalities are concerned; and between A, the teacher, and B, the taught, lies the medium of the vernacular or some other tongue, representing a third element that needs consideration. A and B have each their rights as well as their duties, which require careful adjustment. They have also their relations to some larger group, of which they are individual members; as their studies involve the welfare of the national language, there are mutual obligations existing between them and C, the State; for it will hardly be denied that education is the chief affair of state, or that an ability to think, and to tell the truth, is the principal end of education.

In taking up the rights and duties of both teacher and pupil with reference to the national language, I shall advocate no hard-and-fast procedure for the classroom. We have had perhaps too much prescription of rules in the teaching of English, and too little discussion of first principles which the teacher may assimilate, and, when they have become a regulative force in his life, may instinctively apply in the varying circumstances of his profession. My

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aim is simply to encourage others in thinking about the fundamental obligations I have mentioned, and to suggest an ideal balance among them—something not in all respects within easy grasp, it may be, yet not, on the whole, so far beyond our reach that we cannot profitably strive to attain it. In order to suggest this ideal, it may be necessary to lay stress on certain elements in the problem of teaching English which are in danger of neglect—the rights of the State, for instance, in respect to the purity of the national language; and it may be useless to dwell at length upon those elements which commonly receive undue attention—as, for example, the claims of the mediocre to an education that is quite superficial.

Let us begin with the medium of utterance. First of all, it behooves us to remember that language, in its essence, is something spoken, and that speech lies closer to the personality we wish to correct than does writing. Hence the need of having the student read many of his exercises aloud, so that he may acquire the habit of uttering premeditated truth, may receive correction by word of mouth, and may reform a number of his thoughts and phrases with the living voice.

Now we cannot divorce language from the substance of which it is the expression. This substance, again, flows from the mind of the writer or speaker, but before that it has entered into his mind from sources without. In a sense, then, the correction of a theme or essay should begin with the sources of information, as it must end with the details of usage. Be this as it may, the first demand we make of language, whether spoken or written, is that it represent some portion of truth that deserves communication. Can we assume that the student in his last year at school, or in his first year at college, or indeed at any early stage, will have something worthy of utterance, if he is left to his own devices, or to chance, in his selection of subjects? So far as my experience with the undergraduate goes, we cannot safely assume it. We must know in advance that his mind has been filled, and we must know with what it has been filled; we must see to it that he has materials of thought, and that the materials are well in excess of all draughts we are likely to make upon them when we ask for written compositions. Emptiness of mind is a serious flaw in the writer of a

theme, and needs correction. We must see to all this because the first and sharpest of censures must be uttered when the student undertakes to write upon a subject of which he knows nothing. In the study of the vernacular, so close as this is to the soul of the learner, it is perilous to dally with the truth. We dare not let our pupils infer from our treatment of their compositions that the truth can ever be a secondary matter, or that substance is of less account than the way one manipulates it.

The truth of the individual thoughts is the first consideration. Next in importance comes their sequence. Here is a topic which our present generation is not likely to forget, much attention being paid to it in our manuals of composition. Yet there is something more to be said about it. Not only must we expect a sequence in the matter which a student on a given day exhibits in his theme; but there is an order, by no means superficial, which the immature pupil cannot be expected to provide in his work—which nevertheless must be forthcoming—namely, a substantial order in the tasks that are assigned from week to week and from month to month in a course of systematic study. An essential progress in the thinking of the student must be assured. How can this be brought about? The following is one suggestion. Let the teacher of English restrict the subject-matter of his courses to the field he is supposed to know. Within this field let him select a body of material that is interesting to him, and at the same time is not beyond the capacity of his class. In preparing to teach his chosen material, let him meditate long upon the point where he must begin if he is to attain his object, and longer yet upon this object, that is, upon the precise end he wishes to reach with his group of learners by the close of the year. Let the writing of his students deal with successive parts of that material, and let the correction of papers, like any other educational device, be at all times subservient to the end he has in view, namely, to convert unfed, unorganized, unsensitive minds into minds that are well-nourished, orderly, and sensitive. Otherwise he may wage an unceasing strife with the external symptoms of illiteracy, and never touch the inner seat of weakness and disease.

But we are verging on the duties of the teacher. What, in

general, may we demand of the personality that is engaged in correcting others through the medium of the vernacular? First, the teacher must have had the right sort of personality to begin with; this affords the only guaranty that he will have sought out and received the right sort of training before he enters upon his profession. It is almost indispensable that he come from a family where good books are read and a good custom is observed in speaking. It is absolutely indispensable that from early youth he shall have been a reader of the best things. He must be so familiar with the masterpieces of literature that he has a standard of good sense and good English within him. He must be a well of English undefiled. Late-learners may have their use in the teaching of other subjects; they will not do for English. Mere conscious rules, acquired when one has reached maturity, will never take the place of a correct habit; they cannot rectify a vicious tendency in one's mode of utterance, they cannot change one's mental disposition.

Yet the only proper complement of natural aptitude and correct habit is adequate professional training:

To me nor art without rich gifts of mind,
Nor yet mere genius rude and unrefined,
Seems equal to the task. They each require
The aid of each, and must as friends conspire.

Our guardians of usage must have some such education as the poets and orators who have enriched, refined, and established the English tongue. Upon this great topic I may not enlarge. Suffice it to say that a candidate for the teaching of English in the preparatory school should have a thorough grounding in Latin (if possible also in Greek), a substantial knowledge of all the ancient literary masterpieces—of the Latin mainly at first hand, and of the Greek at least through translations. In addition to the Bachelor's degree he should have a year of special work in the theory of poetry, reaching back from Shelley and Sidney to Aristotle, and accompanied by judicious reading in the chief English poets; in Old and Middle English, so that he may see the modern literature in due perspective, and may be able to consult a historical dictionary of the language

with intelligence; and perhaps in the development of prose, beginning with Cicero and Quintilian and coming down to Burke and Newman. Quintilian, at all events, should not be omitted, as the very best advice on composition and the correction of errors is to be found in him. The prospective teacher of English in the college or university should have something more. He should have the literary insight and human sympathy that come from a full three years of special preparation under competent guidance.

In any case, the corrector of personalities has a right, nay, a duty—his primary right, and his essential duty—to live, and to live abundantly. Nothing could be worse than a teacher of English who is half-dead or half-alive, from whatever cause. A half-trained instructor may be deemed to be only half-alive. But suppose he has the natural endowment and the acquired training that the teacher needs; one requisite to the continuance of his life is leisure for study. Not only that, but he must have the strength and the inspiration as well, and also the incentive. In reinforcing what has just been said, let us mention a few things a university instructor in English ought not to be. He ought not to be untrained in any branch that is essential to an understanding of the English language and literature. He ought not to be a person who affects to despise scholarship. He ought not to be lacking in ambition, or on any score unworthy or hopeless of advancement in his profession. Furthermore, he ought not to be overburdened, stultified, or disheartened with the reading of excessive amounts of uninspiring manuscript. There must not be an overplus of uninteresting sentences and paragraphs in the sum-total of what he reads, but the reverse: he must have more hours for Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton than for Freshman themes; otherwise he will begin to die—to die at the top, so to speak. It is his right and duty to be a vital influence in the lives he is supposed to be shaping. The personalities intrusted to him he may shape for better or for worse. It is hardly conceivable that he will not modify them at all. Yet if there are three possibilities, only one of them is tolerable. He must not leave his timber as it is, he must not warp it more, he must straighten it; and this requires ever-renewed vitality.

And what of the timber? What are the rights and duties of the personalities to be corrected? I shall not speak of what is patent, that is, of obligations that spontaneously suggest themselves on a superficial consideration, as the right of the pupil to the best kind of correction. No teaching could be too good for our land of promise, with the civilization here to be developed. This is obvious. When we penetrate deeper, we note, first of all, that not every person has the same right to an education in the vernacular. An idiot, for example, has not the same right as a genius, nor in general have those who are below the average in capacity or attainments the same right as those who are above it. Doubtless every one in a sense has a claim to instruction in English, but the point is that some have a better claim, or a claim to more of it, than others. Who are these? Clearly, as has been suggested, they who have the greater capacity. It is a law of nature that to those who have shall be given. In our teaching we may well observe the tendencies of nature, following her laws, and aiding her in the accomplishment of her purposes. It is said that "Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth." An easy application of the text may be made to the teaching of English composition.

Moreover, they who show promise have a right not to be herded in classes so large as to be unmanageable, where the individual is lost, and where the teacher, instead of being lifted up and drawing young men after him, must descend to their level, and appeal to the spirit, not of a social group, but of a mob. Extremes should be avoided. Large portions of time should not be lavished on the correction of single individuals or knots of two or three, unless these persons are extraordinarily gifted or exceedingly well-trained. On the other hand, an hour devoted to a class of ten or twelve is likely to produce results more potent and lasting than will three hours a week devoted to a class of thirty. Accordingly, with a given complement of instructors, and a given number of hours for English in the curriculum, it is better to divide our forty-five or thirty students into sections of fifteen or ten, so as to teach them properly when we teach at all. It has been my experience that Freshmen and Sophomores will study more, and will prepare better compositions, when they must read their work aloud before a dozen

of their fellows whom they have come to know as individuals, and in the presence of a teacher whom they know in an intimate way, than under any other external conditions. Assuming that the student of English is worthy of his teaching, he has a right, not only to the best kind of teacher, but also to the best educational conditions.

Another right of the student may be stated thus. We must not require him to read books too rapidly, or to compose too many themes. How many teachers of English have a clear conscience as to their demands on either score? And who shall guard those guardians if they lack a conscience? Better a little reading carefully done, and a little writing based upon adequate thought and reading, than much hasty work of any sort. "No matter how slow the style be at first," says Ben Jonson, "so it be labored and accurate." Connected with his right to an opportunity for thought, and to leisure for the slow and often painful business of expression, is the just and proper claim of the student to some adequate form of publication or utterance. It is unfair to ask him to write week after week, and month after month, without a single chance to produce his best in the hearing of his fellows. In general, when they are not thus presented, let him take charge of his own papers, since he is the one who is most interested in them. It is bad for the teacher to stupefy himself with them in private, and the morality of throwing them into the waste-basket is doubtful. Worse still is an unseen public of one, an assistant, not the teacher, who comes into no personal contact with the pupil, and whose humanity touches the soul of the writer of a theme only through hieroglyphics on its margin.

Finally, if a youth has a right to any teaching whatsoever, he has a right to sympathetic treatment from the person who corrects him. The impulse to correct, which is natural, and is very strong in some teachers, is good only when, like other natural impulses, it is properly regulated. Doubtless we are all acquainted with pedantic men who cannot bridle their tongues when another tongue has made a slip, or withhold their censure if another's pen has gone astray. I am far from arguing against rigorous correction at intervals; but the wise and sympathetic teacher is likely to suppress

something like five out of six impulses to chastise a fault, keeping ever in mind the advice of Ben Jonson, who says: "There is a time to be given all things for maturity, and that even your country husbandman can teach, who to a young plant will not put the pruning-knife, because it seems to fear the iron, as not able to admit the scar. No more would I tell a green writer all his faults, lest I should make him grieve and faint, and at last despair. For nothing doth more hurt than to make him so afraid of all things as he can endeavor nothing."

As to the duties of the pupil little need be said. He must try to tell the truth, and to express it distinctly, in speech as well as in writing. He must learn to be self-critical, so that he may correct himself. This will be accomplished when he is taught to respect the rights of others in the subject he is studying or explaining. His audience has a right to a clear and orderly exposition, and to correct usage. The word he employs must correspond to the object he has in mind, and must mean the same thing to others as to him. Hence it must accord with the meaning in the dictionary. I plead for a generous use of the dictionary in the teaching of English.

Let us pass to the rights and duties of the State. With reference to the vernacular its main duty is no secret. It must provide and encourage able and well-trained teachers, according them ample means of subsistence and a degree of honor not far short of the highest. On this head we may give ear to the words of Milton as they are quoted by Lord Morley for a similar purpose:

Whoever in a state knows how wisely to form the manners of men, and to rule them at home and in war with excellent institutes, him in the first place, above others, I should esteem worthy of all honor. But next to him the man who strives to establish in maxims and rules the method and habit of speaking and writing received from a good age of the nation, and, as it were, to fortify the same round with a kind of wall, the daring to overleap which let a law only short of that of Romulus be used to prevent. . . . The one, as I believe, supplies noble courage and intrepid counsels against an enemy invading the territory. The other takes to himself the task of extirpating and defeating, by means of a learned detective police of ears, and a light band of good authors, that barbarism which makes inroads upon the minds of men, and is a destructive intestine enemy of genius. Nor is it to be considered of small consequence what language, pure or corrupt, a people has, or what is their customary degree of propriety in speaking it. . . . For, let the words of a

country be in part unhandsome and offensive in themselves, in part debased by wear and wrongly uttered; and what do they declare but, by no light indication, that the inhabitants of that country are an indolent, idly-yawning race, with minds already long prepared for any amount of servility? On the other hand, we have never heard that any empire, any state, did not at least flourish in a middling degree as long as its own liking and care for its language lasted.¹

So much for Milton's letter to Bonmattei, with the warning it contains for our own generation and the application we may make of it to the duties of the State. Turning now to the question of rights, one may argue as follows. The State demands an education in the vernacular which shall do the greatest good to the greatest number; this does not necessarily mean conferring an equal benefit upon every individual. Under certain circumstances it might signify the careful education of a few because of the preponderant influence to be exercised upon the language by a relatively small body of persons, such as poets, orators, clergymen, editors, and teachers; a small body, that is, as compared with the population as a whole. If we consider, not the present generation alone, but future generations also, as concerned in our present system of education, we may admit that thoroughly training a few persons of great capacity is of greater advantage to the State than a superficial or ostensible culture of many. Accordingly, my remarks on the correction of papers turn out to be a plea for cherishing the more gifted among our students who show promise of becoming influential in maintaining the purity of the English language. It is, above all, a plea for safeguarding the interests of those who may become teachers of English. Such a plea is never untimely; it cannot be urged too often. The rights of the average student are in no peril, save as they are involved in the rights of neglected potential leaders; and the claims of those who are below the average will not in this humanitarian age go unnoticed. The poor, and their champions, we have always with us.

¹ Morley, *Studies in Literature*, pp. 223, 224.